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Aaron Latham



Betsy K. Frampton

The journalist-author of "Orchids for Mother" claims that the CIA itself is one big fiction machine

Interviewing Aaron Latham should be a breeze. Francis Xavier "Mother" Kimball, the wily, devious protagonist of "Orchids for Mother," Latham's literate thriller about the CIA (*Little, Brown*), spells out the techniques. "You shouldn't come straight out and ask what you want to know. It's too easy for people to sidestep your questions that way. What you should do is get people to tell you a story. Have them tell it from the beginning. That way they don't know what you're after so they don't know what to hide."

Latham in person is neither as formidable nor as fastidious as Mother. *PW* got the impression of miles of height, blue-green eyes, a reddish beard just beginning to show gray strands, and a rather shy smile exposing miraculously even teeth. Softspoken, diffident. Latham gave his visitor a quick tour of his new New York pied-à-terre, an apartment he shares (when he's in town) with his ex-Amherst roommate Mike Kramer, editor of *More* magazine.

For the reader who has enjoyed Latham's disquietingly realistic roman à clef, Latham has many doors to unlock. His protagonist and antagonist, Mother Kimball and Ernest O'Hara, were inspired by well-known Washington figures: James Jesus Angleton, former head of counterintelligence and head of the Israeli desk, and William Colby, director of the CIA, who were engaged in a deadly power struggle for many years. Like the characters in the novel, both were in the OSS, both came to the CIA early, both served in the Rome station. "And they always disliked each other. Their feud shook and divided the CIA. **Approved For Release 2004/10/13 : CIA-RDP88-01350R000200210001-0** fired Angleton."

Latham first disclosed the inter-

Washington with the intention of writing an in-depth nonfiction article about the Central Intelligence Agency. "I kept hearing story after story about the CIA, each of them different. Usually when you're reporting a story, your information begins to match up. With the CIA, since they make up so many different stories, I got a vast array of way-out fabrications. Finally I decided that the CIA is one of the great fiction machines in the country. That's their business; they think up lies. It seemed to me that the only way to cover the story, since you didn't know quite what to believe, was to do it in fiction."

Latham's short story—uncharacteristic for him and for the magazine—appeared in April 1975. The situation continued to fascinate him, and the novel eventually evolved. The names of the characters in the first version were similar to their real-life counterparts. Angleton was Saxonton, Colby was Colgate. When he wrote the novel, Latham changed the names again. "I was so subtle there that nobody will ever see where I got the two names, so I'll just tell you. I wanted to give them names that were rooted in fiction to make the point that these characters embodied the same kind of fictional gray area as the agency itself. So I went to the great and the original spy book: Rudyard Kipling's 'Kim.' Kim's full name was Kimball O'Hara." Latham's eyes sparkle; a grin flashes briefly. Is he more devious than he appears on the surface?

Latham's first brush with the CIA occurred when he was an editor of *Esquire*. "I read Victor Marchetti's 'The' a nonfiction article. After infinite hours of taping, we had a terrific piece. ['Terrific' pronounced slowly and

lable, is a favorite word.] And the CIA went to court and blocked publication."

How did the CIA find out about the article? Latham says, ironically, "One of the curious things to me is that the CIA knows an incredible amount (even though they, you understand, 'don't do any domestic spying') about what's coming down the pike in terms of publishing. I no sooner got this story to *Esquire* than we had a court order slapped on us. The CIA already had a copy of the story in their hands." Latham throws up his hands, laughs ruefully.

Information on the CIA, for the aborted article and for his later novel, was relatively easy to acquire, Latham discovered. "Everybody who leaves the CIA remains in the fraternity. They all stay in touch with one another; they all trade news." And obviously they share it, although Latham will not reveal his sources.

Readers of "Orchids for Mother" may recoil with dismay as Latham reveals shady CIA shenanigans. Critics who deplore this fact-letting as unpatriotic draw no compunctions from Aaron Latham. "I don't feel that any journalism I've done on the CIA has harmed the country. On the contrary, investigative journalism can ultimately help the country heal itself. We probably have to have an intelligence-gathering operation. But it's one thing to look into a crystal ball and predict what might happen. It's another to try to make what's going on conform to what you want to happen."

Latham, born in "godforsaken" west Texas, educated at Amherst and **Approved For Release 2004/10/13 : CIA-RDP88-01350R000200210001-0** wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on F. Scott Fitzgerald. While investigating Fitzgerald's stint as a Hollywood scriptwriter, he